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E. H. W. MEYERSTEIN

THE BOY

A MODERN POEM

LONDON

INGPEN & GRANT

12 Bury Street, W.C. 1

1928

TO CEDRIC MORRIS,
AS FROM A POET TO A PAINTER

THE BOY

I

As soon as he could lace his boots
He knew he would not be content
Until he had torn up the roots
Of life and love's astonishment.

He would not credit half the tales
Wherewith a wakeful world aspires
To guide her sheep; Convention's scales
Dropt from his eyes, and left them fires.

And by their gleam Existence stood
Revealed as Pandemonium,
And he a spirit who gained his good
By trampling down "Thy Kingdom come."

There was no future and no past,
For all lay present and exposed,
No scope at all for fortune's cast;
If one thought otherwise, he dozed.

The kingdoms of this world and Christ
Were one, were now; the globe revolved
Alike for those who hit or missed,
All contradictions were dissolved.

Man stood upon the sun and moon,
Challenged each star his face to outshine,
Named isle or ocean in the noon,
And quaffed the firmament as wine.

THE BOY

All was his prey, east, west, south, north,
The mortal images that thronged
The temple of his going forth;
He could not wrong them or be wronged.

His triumph was the burden of
The birds, the whinnying of the beasts,
The haste of winds and rains, the shove
Of waters toward their earthy feasts.

Each moment with its load of news
Was victory, and the defeat
Of a wan ghost that might accuse
His glory utter and complete.

So dreamed the child, and when across
The dream fell ire or body's pain,
He read it not as so much loss
But, silently, as so much gain.

The word of blame, the ruler's stroke
Were bright as sunlit cloud for him,
And when parental thunder broke
Already seen the Cherubim.

THE BOY

II

THE ~~house~~ with its drab plastered hall,
Cracked ceilings like the coast of maps,
Depending strip from parlour wall,
Corroded bolts and drizzling taps,

Cramped bedsteads in the upper rooms,
Untended lawn and window box,
Harboured supposititious glooms;
"All's light," he said, "when angel knocks."

He was the angel, he had seen
One's picture in a Bible torn;
He fancied that his flesh was green
And locks like mane of unicorn.

But, as time leavened first romance,
He was Truth's knight, and the Worm's claw
Unpinned his charger, while the lance
Entered the huge fire-breathing maw.

And Paradise 'twas that the world,
Wherein this revelation walked,
Saw but a grubby boy with curled
Hair, who ate well, and seldom talked.

The breakfast and the face entombed
In mug; and father's grumbling vaunt
Of duties to which slaves were doomed;
And mother's anxious nod to aunt;

THE BOY

And sister's pipe " May I get down? " ;
And brother's plea for football boots;
And " No more going to the Crown " ;
Between the strident motor hoots;

The quarrel for the last spoonful
Of jam; the kick on the bare shin;
The sidelong blow 'twixt lobe and skull;
The prick of buttock-reaching pin;

What else were they but incidents
Of rapture in a soul too high
For earth's delights or **detriments**,
A stroller in the **stainless sky**?

A death there was, but what of that?
No sadder than when boy next door
Brought home the corpse of tabby cat,
And omnibus was blamed therefor.

Always there seemed to be a life
To fill the chair of life that went,
Just as one swapped a *Gem* or knife
When all the weekly pelf was spent.

And, when the need to have a trade
'Prenticed him to his father's shop,
The field of freedom, undismayed,
Nay watered, put forth second crop.

For no temptation troubled him
To be other than the thing he was,
An insect swayed by heaven's whim,
Rainbow-like as prismatic glass.

THE BOY

The sport, the jest, the cheap pursuit
Of youth absolved from labour's cage
Left him no whit more resolute,
More slack, than at the board-school age.

For life and death and play and work
Were hallowed by his soul unsexed;
There was nor grief nor bliss to shirk,
No subterfuge, no cold pretext.

O divine Inexperience,
The wish of all, the woe of one!
Why sufferest thou for no offence?
Wherefore's eclipsed so full a sun?

THE BOY

III

SHE came, his mother's brother's ~~wife~~,
From Canada, to dwell with ~~them~~;
And lo, the curtain of his life
Was rent apart from ring to hem!

A vision of such varying charm
He hardly knew ~~when~~ she was ~~there~~,
For he could feel ~~her distant arm~~,
Unwilling, and her ~~distant~~ hair.

At first he yearned to hear the voice
Of husband hale her from the room;
Imagination could rejoice,
And crouch, well warmed, in chill of tomb.

Of love what should raw sixteen know,
When passion is bewilderment?
He only knew he was aglow,
And dream of her most excellent.

The house could ill afford to hold
Two families, but times were bad,
His uncle's money good; no scold
The intruder, nay, sincere and glad.

A little brightness can atone
For crowding, so the reason ran,
And none was eager to throw stone;
Even thus the tragedy began.

THE BOY

The husband was not slow to tire
Of what by way of live reward
Service had gained; he would admire
Any who felt his forearm scarred,

As she had done; he pined for new
Quarry, for qualms of new contact;
His fires their homely hearth outgrew,
Feebly he doubted of the fact,

Could find the fault his own, and took
The cease to cinema or play;
She misinterpreted the look
Estranged; but smiled serenely gay.

One eve, perusing side by side
The placards on a public hall,
A figure passed them who belied
His choice, and proved her mean and small.

Thenceforward could he scarcely rest,
But made the spot his twilight fane,
As demoniacally possess,
Until he saw her in the rain.

And then he knew she was for him,
And he for her; the one at home
Shrank into a reminder grim
Of drummer days ere beard had come.

To speak was easy, to arrange
Walk easier, on a grassy bank
To take her in his arms and change
Addresses easiest; love was frank.

THE BOY

But she turned fickle, tired of him
Ere he of her; to be revenged
He sought promiscuous lip and limb,
And grew fresh plumes for what were singed.

And there was comfort yet behind,
For, while he followed his frank bent,
The wife could satisfaction find
In a mere boy who bought her scent.

She made no mountain of her fear,
“It’s only calf-love,” she would say,
“And I don’t mind, if you don’t, dear;
I need a friend while you’re away.”

And so the mischief waxed and throve
In that South London house, the three
Were captive in the bonds of love,
Bound firmest while they thought them free

THE BOY

IV

He slept : the broad September flow
Of sun transfigured half the room;
The mirror sparkled as with snow,
The sideboard hardly seemed a tomb.

A jug of drooping marigolds,
Aquiver in the tranquil light,
And the torn portière's dusty folds,
Had stol'n a star or two of night.

The family, save him and her,
Had trooped out for a Saturday
Call on a cousin; no demur
Was raised at her request to stay.

And he was working overtime,
Would not be back till half-past three;
To doze on sofa was no crime,
She promised to be down for tea.

The clock struck four, and she came in,
A steaming kettle in her hand;
Laid was the table; " Let's begin,"
She said, and glimpsed the lids ray-fanned.

' He hasn't woken up ' ; she stirred
The tea leaves in the scalding pot,
In expectation of a word
Or gesture, but he shifted not.

THE BOY

Conspiracy of light and sound!
She fixed the sofa with her stare,
And prompt imagination found
'Twas her true self recumbent there.

Unto that moment she had been
Possessor of her inmost will,
In her conceit a virgin queen,
Although she loved her husband still.

But with that second glimpse the blood
Fled to her brow, and all the mind
Was feminine; severe she stood,
Deriding previous choice as blind.

And with a child's deliberate haste
She thrust the kettle on the hob,
To set her mouth on his, and taste
The manhood that she meant to rob.

So soft the experiment, the lids
Wavered not once, and she drew back,
Scared out of hue; when Nature bids,
Cheeks blanch at the resolved attack.

Suffering him wake when he would wake,
She drank a cup before he did,
And hoped it was not a mistake;
Lukewarm? She thirsted to be chid.

But he could only speak his dream,
That he was saying the Lord's Prayer,
And stopt at "lead us" with a scream
Because an angel tugged his hair.

THE BOY

And when I asked the reason why,
He said I was in love with you,
And for your sake prepared to die;
I wonder if such dreams are true."

I wonder too. You say you are,
And, if I believed all you say,
We might find we had gone too far;
Where there's a will, dear, there's a way."

Dear, spoken accidentally?
None but her husband she called so.
He eyed her, and she met his eye;
For she knew half she wished to know.

THE BOY

V

THE husband was a traveller
In bracelets, clocks, and brooches; he
Would sometimes also deal in fur,
And got his wife a collar free.

And in a long box 'neath their bed
There was a pile of unsold stuff
To stand the couple in good stead
If business breezes should blow rough.

Through their two childless married years
He had not once gone to the box,
Except to add, despite her fears,
A gold watch to the dozen clocks.

For acquisition was his Christ,
Holier than ramble, sleep, or dress,
And purchase of goods cheaply priced
This and the next world's happiness.

She doubted if it were come by
Fairly; receiving statement plain,
Said, "A nice watch," and with a sigh
Composed herself to sleep again.

Though months had moved since that ev
The watch yet occupied her mind,
And on the youth's last gift of scent
Excuse to show it she designed.

THE BOY

So, when the dish of tea was done,
She bade him mount the stairs with her,
And, for a quiet piece of fun,
See her dress up in her best fur.

'He gave me this," she said, "and yet
He will not give me a gold watch."
'I'd give you that and more, my pet;
He only cares for bowls and Scotch."

'You don't know him, you impish boy,
As I do; it's a miser's heart;
While you're all sleeping, what's his joy?
To hear me read *Exchange and Mart*.

'Why, he has tucked away a score—
Hundreds—of things quite saleable,
Which he won't sell—there, on the floor!
Say if you don't think this looks well."

'And keeps the key himself, of course."
'I took it from his dressing-gown
Just now." "Grey mare's the better horse;
Let's turn his treasure upside down!"

She sniggered at such disrespect
Of uncles, drawing forth the key,
While he, with flushing face erect,
Opened the door, peered out to see

If any of the party were
Returned, then muttered "The coast's clear,
Darling." "You're a sight smarter, *cher*,
Than I yet took you for; come here."

THE BOY

The watch was on his palm, her cheek
'Gainst his, the moist grey eyes aflame;
He gazed, she gazed; he dared not speak;
She whispered—ah! her husband's name.

But shyness thrilled him. "Dearest thing,
You wouldn't make a thief of me?
Take this; you've got me on a string;
Let him and his possessions be!"

This was the test, and he had said
Just what she wanted him to say.
They pushed the full box 'neath the bed;
And either heart was damned that day.

THE BOY

VI

Now fiercest love's infernal fire
Was kindled in the fated pair;
Her body grew his one desire,
Her traits pursued him everywhere.

In casual glance of girl or man
He saw the lineaments of his aim;
Over the day's laborious plan
They bent, and sanctified the game.

His dreams in bed were sights no more,
But desperate acts and organs touched,
And what a football was before
Became a world of flesh unclutched.

He shrieked for mercy, and abjured
The plea in the same nightmare breath;
And, when sleep fell, it but procured
Oasis betwixt death and death.

All drink was fuel, and all food
A strop to whet the unbladed vein
Of his aroused and frantic blood
That struck, flowed back, and struck again.

Moments of mutual contact drove
Imagination to distress,
Because, so real was her love,
He needed but to stroke her dress.

THE BOY

Their agony they owned : “ We have
Only ourselves to thank for this ” ;
And with the words her mouth she gave
Hostage to his unmeaning kiss.

THE BOY

VII

HOWE'ER o'erwrought, howe'er beset,
Woman of man has vantage one :
She must be practical; love's net
Suffers her finish what's begun.

The details of the daily task
Abide unclouded by despair,
Use's inalterable mask
Keeps the tormented features fair.

The heart may sink beneath the weight,
And still the hand be firm and true;
She scrubs the floor and scours the plate
Although she is in love with you.

So, while his wasted appetite,
Pallor, and sullenness provoked
The household's comment, her blank plight
Was unbeheld, or overlooked.

She made excuse, as if in fun :
He's growing up, the period
Between the 'teens and twenty one
Is difficult; you were most odd,

I'm pretty sure, about his age."
Uncle and family agreed;
He chafed his teeth in nervous rage,
Uncle, appealed to, made heart bleed.

THE BOY

For in him shone one selfless spark
That redeemed jealousy: "How wrong
Nightly to stroll the local park,
And leave her, even with me, so long!"

His mother questioned him; the aunt,
Who had lived with them and died last year,
Might be the thorn, or earnings scant:
Don't you give in, boy; persevere!

Your father's business will be yours
One day, and who ~~got rich~~ at once?
You should ~~spend more time~~ out of doors;
Remember ~~how you used to~~ trounce

Your cousins at tennis. Well, I won't
Trouble you, but I hate to see
My boy look *down*, as if affront
Were put on him. Confide in me!"

He shook his head, she sauntered out;
His father was a sterner sort;
You've messed the brands of tea about;
Your mind's not on the shop, but sport.

Eighteen! Why, at eighteen I had
Something to work for, an ideal,
And three true friends. There's nothing bad
In you, perhaps, but nothing real.

Wake up! To-night your uncle may
Have a word with you; heed him well,
For years he had to make his way
Soldiering; he has been through hell."

THE BOY

The blue eyes blazed : " What right has he,
Because he happens to have fought
Twice for his country, to tell me
What I ought not to do or ought?"

The father eyed his son askance;
' Small makings of a grocer there "'
He thought, but said " You'll not advance
Your prospects talking so; take care!"

Still smiled the lips; once more she heard
Of his intolerable pain;
She told him what she felt; the word
Of love hurt most, for love was sane.

THE BOY

VIII

THE evening shower had left the street
As smooth as any looking-glass;
The sweethearts on the corner seat
*Seemed strangers till the steps should pass.

A middle-aged man to a youth
Was holding forth on wedded love,
Its rise, subsidence, and the growth
*Of thoughts worth taking notice of.

“Don’t think, old chap, I haven’t seen
What you’ve been going through of late;
I know some things, because I’ve been
About the world : young men can’t wait.

“That pair who shifted as they heard
Us coming, in a year or two,
“Or less, maybe, will cry ‘Absurd,’
Seeing others do what now *they* do.

“Your father’s told me, as you know,
To give you a good lecturing;
I said I would. Remember, though,
I sympathize; I’ve felt the sting.

“I am your friend, besides the man
You most abominate just now.
Your trouble is that you’ve no plan,
But flounder blindly through the slough. *

THE BOY

- “ Nine out of ten of us begin
With someone who's already attached;
It's more misfortune than a sin,
And from such eggs love's rarely hatched.
- “ As well as most I know the worth,
The precise worth, of woman's esteem,
The least expensive thing on earth,
And perishable as ice-cream.
- “ You see, I've worn King's uniform,
And the young lady now your aunt
Was not the first to take by storm
This arm. ~~Don't~~ wince; ~~it's~~ not a taunt.
- “ Women want change, change they must have,
And husbands with the most success
Grant it ~~them~~ oftenest, behave
Shrewdly, and keep well out of the mess.
- “ Had I been told a truth like that
When I was the same age as you,
I'd have felt like hurling a brickbat;
Yet woken up, and found it true.
- “ This isn't what the old man thought
I should be dinning in your ears;
For my experience has been bought
Harder than his. To still his fears
- “ I must first find out yours. Look here!
He doesn't know you're sweet on her;
Just you and I know that; she's clear
~~Of~~ blame; *I don't think you a cur;*”

THE BOY

" Fix that well in the brain, and act
According; all we want is peace.
Don't look as if you've just been smacked,
But plaster down your hair with grease."

" You mean I *may* make love, I may
Steal her from you? You mean you don't
Mind?" " Yes, yes, have it your own way;
I'll put her wise to you." " You won't! "

" Don't flare up, anyhow. All's right,
We understand each other, ~~that's~~
The principle. You're ghastly white;
I'll give you one of my best hats.

" So that you make a perfect start.
You'll *find* a mate—for better or worse;
Meanwhile your uncle takes your part.
Hold your head up; don't care a curse "

So the insidious poison crept
Into the lover's anguished soul;
Soundly at last that night he slept,
And awoke proud that he was whole.

THE BOY

IX

" I FANCY, dear, for some time past
I have neglected you; perhaps
You think my fondness doesn't last,
But I'm not built like other chaps.

" To see you happy was my chief
Desire, and still is. In this house
Strikes me there's precious small relief
From grumbling ~~but~~ that queer young mouse.

" There's ~~something~~ bright about the boy,
A fact ~~his~~ father cannot see;
He has the faculty ~~of~~ joy
That means so much to you and me.

" He's fond of you, and tells me so;
And in his favour that's a point.
Go with him more, girl, while I go
About my business—yes, a joint

" Arrangement to do as we like.
I've paved the way, so there's no need
To talk him round. One motor-bike
Hired won't make my finances bleed.

" I don't grudge you a joy-ride, dear,
Any more than you, now and then,
Grudge me a night away from here;
You're a safe woman with young men.

THE BOY

“ I’ve worried you with my affairs
Too often; sort of holiday
From them and me’s quite sound. Who cares?
Don’t bother what the others say :

“ Still, on the quiet answers best.
I’d thought I’d let you know, that’s all.
From one another we want rest;
You’re far too knowing, both, to fall.”

The complaisance could not deceive;
Reasons he had to cast no blame :
She smiled, and said “ Then you don’t grieve
On our account; we’ll play the game.”

THE BOY

X

Love's game is played indifferent well
When neither party plays to win;
No game at all when husbands tell
Their wives to slake the heart with sin!

No game at all when boys are led
By women weak and men mean-souled!
Though blood run turbulent and red,
The night of victory's but cold.

Only when some exalted mind
Severs the chain and frees the thrall,
Restoring vision to the blind,
Is love's game played, if played at all.

* * * *

· Beautiful, bravest, only thing
That ever has brought human peace
To me, O lay your long white wing,
That gauzy arm, on my brow's crease! "

· Child that I yearned for, child denied,
Baby, whose words are helpless sound,
He that was never born nor died,
I look at you, and feel no wound."

· I look at you, and see the end
Of all the world in music, though
There's not a breath comes from my friend,
My hope, my swan, my sunset's glow."

THE BOY

‘ I sinned, I kissed you as you slept,
So am unworthy of your kiss.”
“ O, my dream’s angel, I have wept,
Thinking that I should not have this.

And never one grudges us our love! ”
“ O, we are free, free as the birds! ”
‘ Give the machine another shove! ”
“ Not frightened of the old folk’s words? ”

Environment’s the curse of those
Whose amorous raptures must be hid;
They are due home when the clock goes
Eleven, or the jaunt’s forbid.

THE BOY

XI

THE house had seemingly retired;
He had his own room at the top,
Promoted where he most desired
On serving in the grocer's shop.

For there she slept three years ago,
When uncle brought his plighted mate
Into the family for show,
And canvassed was the wedding date.

The fact meant little to him then,
When woman was but man in skirts;
How often since at stroke of ten
He'd cry " She's with him now; it hurts! "

But now he cried " It hurts no more! "
And, by the niggardly gaslight,
Polished the patent shoes he wore
Till they were there the sole things bright.

Awry was not one strand of hair,
His tie cost five and six, no less;
Socks were laid out, a brand new pair,
And on the bed a trouser-press.

To-morrow was Bank Holiday,
And he had leave the whole to spend
Alone with her some miles away;
Was not his uncle a true friend?

THE BOY

“ I love her, Father.” “ Love? *Outcast !* ”
The blow was not severe; he reeled,
Catching the bedpost like a mast;
The taunt it was that truth revealed.

THE BOY

XII

OUTCAST, the momentary taunt
Was no more than a man's insult,
Yet in his brain it stirred a vaunt
Of vengeance rapidly adult.

Outcast, he saw in it the truth
That stealer of the wife is such,
Although he be a simple youth,
And husband privy to the clutch.

His father told him what he was,
And he was what his father said;
The sordid change had come to pass :
If God would only strike him dead !

All this was a tumultuous flash,
A vision, as he caught the post.
The other feared he had been too rash.
“ Get up—you're looking like a ghost,—

“ And pull yourself together, lad !
Perhaps we've taken this in time,
And matters are not quite so bad ;
You're not accused yet of a crime.”

He emptied the half-filled carafe,
Handed the glass with shaking hand ;
His son refused it with a laugh :
“ You're far too old to understand.

THE BOY

“ Go down and break the news to Mum;
You needn't say I'm hurt, I'm not;
You missed my ear, and saved the drum,
Creditable enough boss shot.”

Misliking that ironic mood,
The father would not say a word;
Enough, for one night, of bad blood;
He'd spoken out, and the boy 'd heard.

Grasping the tell-tale paper still,
He closed the door and shuffled down.
“ What price that for a first-class mill? ”
Muttered the youth with vacant frown.

“ So I'm an outcast now; so far,
So good. To-morrow, all the same,
I'll be in heaven with my star.
Not locked me in! I've won the game!

His finery was undisturbed,
He gave his shoes another rub;
Concluded that he well had curbed
Rage, and felt ravenous for grub.

THE BOY

XIII

His mother had got in a heap
Of victuals for the coming day,
Plums, oranges, bananas, cheap
Sweets for the four-year-old; they lay

Piled on the dining-room sideboard,
Still in their bags. He stole downstairs;
To lose a few she could afford,
He rather looked to find some pears.

But what he did not look to find
Was his love in her dressing-gown.
They blankly gazed, as if struck blind
By darkness: "When did you come down?"

"Only just now. He's taken queer;
There used to be some brandy kept
Against emergencies." "No fear;
He's had the last drop while we slept.

"I'm bothered if his precious thirst
Would leave the bottle. Queer before!
Take up an orange; peel it first,
And stand with me behind the door."

"Talk low!" "Dad's found a note I scrawled
To you this evening." "Foolish pup!
We heard the noise." "Yes, I've been hauled
Over the coals, a rare blow up.

THE BOY

" Called me an outcast, tried to bash
This ear in." " So to-morrow's off."
Her firmness fired him like a lash :
" It isn't! Shan't be! " " That's his cough,"

" I must run up." " Tip him the wink;
Stick to our guns." " I'll do my best."
Vanished the star! O, vain to think!
" I really am a loathsome pest."

There is strange comfort when we know
The truth about ourselves, for then
We act our definition; so
He took, and tiptoed up again.

THE BOY

XIV

THE floor is strewn with orange peel,
And his coat hanging from the chair;
Below they have begun the meal;
The blanket chafes his lips and hair.

His father with a buckled belt
Stands braced to deal another blow
Upon the naked skin, whose welt
Heaves as a stalk with rain aglow.

It is the penalty for theft;
She has advised him to submit,
Her man will not alone be left;
With him all day her doom to sit.

Ignored the mother's exigence,
And the two youngest open-eyed;
Unpardonable was the offence,
Prone on his bed he must abide.

Five strokes have fallen, and the last
Sends back the colour to his cheek;
He knows that he has been outclassed
By husband vile and woman weak.

That should assist you to behave.
Pull up ~~your~~ trousers; here is your coat."
I will remember," pouts the slave;
Yet has he cause enough to gloat.

THE BOY

Demurer since the punishment
His mien, he spoke less, he gave way
In table tempests, and he went
Often into the yard to play.

He bought things for the little ones,
Surprise things, as was never his wont;
They made a flimsy cap with "Dunce,"
And crowned him while he pleaded "Don

All this was new, but it appalled,
Because his eyes were bleak and wild;
When he consented to be mauled,
She held a child, but not her child.

His way with her young sister-in-law
Was soft, respectful, and constrained;
Though jaunts were unproscribed, she saw
The cycle at its shop remained.

She babbled to the bedrid man;
It was not quinsy, as they feared.
"I think it rather a good plan
To stay indoors and grow a beard.

"Heading for trouble? Well, I'm not
Surprised, if he *will* treat the boy
As a mere infant. Tommy rot!
He has the power of spreading joy;

"Haven't I said so? And that's why
I don't stand in the wife's way;
She's always happy when he's by;
I can't be with her all the day.

THE BOY

Of course if this is an excuse
To turn us out when I am well,
Follow you. But it's no use
Cramping young lives, for they'll rebel."

* * * *

Although he is my brother, and she
So useful in the house, I'm sure
Things would run smooth with you and me
If they were out of it; endure

can't. There's something going on
I can half see, and you won't, dear,
Something between her and our son;
All would be right if she weren't here."

Nonsense! He's had his lesson; you
Don't notice how it has sobered him;
And she's one of the very few
Girls who don't act on a boy's whim,

One in a hundred; wears her skirt
Inch longer than the average girl;
No lipstick; nothing said to hurt;
Reads to her husband: she's a pearl."

But you forget the hired machine."
Didn't your brother suggest that? "
You want his money, you're so mean."
Money be blowed! She's not a cat."

THE BOY

“ I tell you she’s a danger.” “ Then
You must have fears for me; don’t shout.’
‘ She’s just the sort that ruins men.”
“ I’ve heard enough for once; get out! ”

Then he would go, or she would go,
He to his cronies at the Crown,
She to darn hosiery below;
And so their lives jogged up and down

THE BOY

XVI

No loneliness to soothe despair
Like that of numbers! Beaten boys
Preen nostrils in the peopled air,
And lose in tubes their dumb annoys.

While father peace from partner's tongue
Sought opposite the pillar box,
Peace from what worse than belting stung
Boy sought on green near London Docks.

For he discovery had made
That uncle used him as a pawn,
And that the home imbroglio paid,
While Age was courting on that lawn.

If, as Youth feared, it could be shown
That Youth was father of a child,
Excellent cause to pick a bone!
Disunion unreconciled!

Through *her* came truth, but not through her;
She bade him take up with a girl
Just for the show; "It won't occur
To you now, but we'd better furl

Our sails. Don't think that I forget
How you stood punishment *for me*;
I never was quite so upset
As on that morning; I could see'

THE BOY

“ You writhe, and yearned to bear the blows.
But things are calmer now, thank Heaven.
The best of love's beneath the rose;
Ever my own, you are forgiven,

“ No matter what you do! Now find
A flapper; write the notes to her;
Leave them about still, as a blind:
Your pal, from that post I shan't stir.”

The plan was sane, like all her plans;
And, as it chanced, a girl he knew
From childhood, his or any man's,
So far as walks went; she would do.

But, for his grief, she had a friend,
Who sat with sweetheart on a seat
The night his uncle 'gan to mend
The affair, and watched them down the street

She knew the man, and all too well;
She had been his particular aim;
Turning her happiness to hell,
He had gone; that illness was his game.

On the third stroll his character
Was riddled by the person wronged,
And the boy lover's loud demur
Silenced by argument three-pronged.

Two more could tell a truthful tale,
And one had suitor weighted down
With child not his; the kinsman's sale
Sank, faith in man was overthrown.

THE BOY

His mind, of scarce ignoble cast,
Saw in despair a something *earned*,
Life was a tonic of vile taste
To be digested, not returned.

And from despair deliverance lay
In an unguessed external act;
Firm that he must not make away
With his own body, he was racked.

Now, fondest irony, the spot
Most soothing to his lonely pain
Was where that fiend his bolts had shot,
And made his sin the nephew's stain.

THE BOY

XVII

IN first awareness' agony
He had confided in his love;
There was no motion of her eye
More than the plume of brooding dove.

"All men are made like him," she said,
"And time may make you like him too;
Spirits of our mould are happier dead:
I'd not say that, only to you."

"But you can't mean that I am so;
I'd stand prepared to cast my life
Away on your bare 'yes' or 'no'."
"Cut my throat with the carving-knife!"

"*Your* throat? My life, I couldn't lay
One finger on your purest flesh,
Except to cherish, and to play
For ever in the silken mesh.

"For it's all round me, like a cage;
I am your body's prisoner."
"Then saw the bars through in *your* rage;
There is no other way to her."

"To her? To you—to you, my ~~own~~ own?
No way to you but by *your* death?"
"I'm earnest, but leave well alone;
Words such as ours are waste of breath."

THE BOY

HIS brain was jabbed as by a dirk,
He seemed to shake in every limb;
She sat down to her needlework,
And kept her eyes on it, not him.

And then she spoke again, as if
To her own mind: "I've had it out
With all three; much more than a tiff
When we're sent to the right about.

You see, boy, it's your mother wants
Us out, your father's satisfied,
And *he* too, so long as he plants
Himself wherever he's least tied.

It's worst for me, really it is;
You have the shop, I am fixed here;
And woman can't live on a kiss."
He faced her with a mouth severe.

You're thinking he could be removed;
He can't, he's just a weight of lead.
It makes no odds, and that I've proved,
Whether he be alive or dead."

You can't ~~say~~ that." "I can, I do;
I'm not ~~encouraging~~ your hate.
Hate him the less if *our* love's true!
We're all three in the hands of fate."

Yet ~~she could~~ go on sewing there
While ~~his~~ brain was a burning loom!
He hurried out, and up the stair,
And marched into his uncle's room.

THE BOY

XVIII

"I WANT two words with you." The bed
Was empty, basin brimmed with suds,
Shoes disarranged, pyjamas spread
On floor, three sprays of red rosebuds

On dressing-table. Flowers! For whom?
For her? He could not understand.
As 'twere a mouse, he felt one bloom;
It left a petal in his hand.

Roses! The blood ran to his head;
A second's glance seemed gaze of hours:
"That's why she doesn't want him dead;
He wins her round with bribes of flowers."

Uncertain whither the quick mood
Would lead, she had crept up the stair;
And, seeing the stript bed, "That's good"
Exclaimed; "Gone out to get some air."

But her young lover kept his back
Still to the entry; had he heard?
She would speak louder: "Left his mac;
It's raining; something has occurred."

"What do these roses mean?" The tone
Was organ-deep. "Roses? I see!
You stood in front of them. Now own!
Which of you has got these for me?"

THE BOY

Oh, what a scent!" " *He* bought you them."
I never saw them until now.
While I've been stitching on this hem
In the back parlour—" " Yes, that's how

He could go out unheard by us.
But you know nothing of these?" " True!
Nothing at all! You funny cuss,
From whom else could they come but you?"

They *do not* come from me; you said
Which of you.' So, you're made contrite
By wretched gifts." " No, no! Your head
Must ache, dear. Why, you'd call black white!"

I would call you—but you are—weak!
Oh, why can't I get out of hell?
Don't look at ~~me~~ like that, but speak!
I want but one thing—to be well,

Not you, not you! " She had her arm
Round his right shoulder as he spoke,
But turned her head in true alarm
As a thin voice the stillness broke :

They are from me, his mother; yes,
From ~~me~~. Please go and leave my son.
You need not, either of you, confess;
I have found out. I've lost, you've won.

I bought the flowers to kill the doubt
That has been killing me. Go, go!
There's one thing I can't do without,
That's him, my boy. Please don't say "~~no~~."

THE BOY

Sun-gilded stood the three; the wife
Flung herself at the mother's feet;
The boy looked on, as if his life
Were pleading at God's judgment-seat.

THE BOY

XIX

WHAT is this conclave? Roses! Whose?
Anything broken? " " The truth's known."
Mum wants you both out." " That's old news.
Look out for squalls; he's not alone.

If he sees her and you, my son,
With half the booze he's had to-day,
A belting will be merely fun;
So keep out of the gov'nor's way."

He's not alone?" " He has to be
Steadied across the road. I went
To post some letters. You'll soon see
What his state is; are you content?"

The mother hobbled out, the boy
Strode squarely up to the dire man :
She lives in terror of you. Destroy
Our happiness! See if you can! "

Why, what's the row over? " " The row
Is that I know how you behave,
Not from her; never you mind how!
I know; but you shan't be her grave.

I'll take her out with me; we'll find
A job together." " Keep your head! "
Want a piece, do you, of my mind?"
No, that's a thing I never said."

THE BOY

- “ You shall not squabble,” the wife cried,
“ With this new misery round us.”
“ Correct!” the husband laughed; “ He’s tried—
Who wouldn’t be?—by women’s fuss.
- “ Listen! I know the views of both
On me—that’s neither here nor there!
I don’t defend myself, being loth
To make a scene when the truth’s bare.
- “ But, young ’un, I admire your pluck;
And I’ve told her I do, that’s plain.
Still, for Christ’s sake, don’t run amok,
Or send good money down the drain.
- “ You’ve *got* a job; you’d throw it up?
Thousands are out of jobs these days.
You’d try the dole, starvation’s cup? ”
“ Darling, he means just what he says.”
- “ Of course, it is a million shames
That ever she and this one met;
But, if we hadn’t, would your claims
Ever have stood a chance? You bet! ”
- “ He brought me here from Canada;
In Canada I should have stayed.”
“ That’s how it is, and there’s ta-ta
To *present* cruelties.” “ Well played!
- “ You are a brute, and no mistake;
You’ve got us under your great thumb.
Because you’re always on the make
You’d see us damned to Kingdom Come.

THE BOY

- " Still, you are right; I see that now,
And things must go on as they are."
- " And you're no fool, boy! Let's pow-wow;
Have an inferior cigar? "
- " I'll light it; I've not seen him smoke,
Except Virginias. Don't refuse!
He's by no means a generous bloke."
- " That's what is said, but not *my* views.
- " Now, on condition we are friends—
Better—on no condition at all—
For all my faults I'll make amends
With a fine fish out of my haul."
- " What ever is he going to do?
You're smoking that as if you're used
To nothing but cigars." " Pooh, pooh,
You must be quicky disabused,
- " My dear; he smokes them on the sly."
- " I don't." " Well, we won't argue; here's
A gold watch—yours. Don't ask me why.
Luck in the best of all careers,
- " A grocer's! Not a stolen one!
Ask her if you may take it, ask!
She says you may. Your luck's begun."
- " You've put him to a sorry task,
- " Disgorging from his precious box."
- " But I'm not sorry to disgorge;
In life one has to stand hard knocks.
God bless you, and God save King George! "

THE BOY

There was that in his hectic hue
To make them shiver as they stood;
He had his will, they bade adieu
To all hostilities for good.

Peace held the house that evening; while
Father slept off his drunken throes,
The four sat down in friendly style
To seven games of dominoes.

THE BOY

XX

Now self-abasement and disgust
Choke the wrecked soul and its strained sight;
Gone is amazement, meekness, trust;
Peace shines by the Destroyer's light.

What if in bitterest solitude
He crushed the watch beneath his heel?
He could not crush the instinct crude
That made him own the fact at meal.

For in the giver's face he saw
A kindness, sorrowful, sincere;
It was a watch without a flaw,
Worth six pound second-hand, or near.

Uncle and father now were paired
In one another's friendship, drank
Together at the bar, and shared
A small investment at the Bank.

Ay, and he fancied in her glance
A hint of passion, half disdain;
She said " You've thrown away the chance
Of *his* love," when she spoke again.

' His *love*? ' " Yes, all love's something worth."
His sobs came sudden, unperplexed,
That she, the purest soul on earth,
Sware troth unto the Devil's text.

THE BOY

But she supposed they were regret
For gift-horse petulantly destroyed;
And, fingering his fair lashes wet,
Faltered "Life's meant to be enjoyed."

*"But thou shalt not enjoy it long;
Thou hast asked at these hands to die;
There, there the truth; thy present song
Is unresentful blasphemy.*

*"The angel in thy soul is slain,
Only the Devil now commands" :*
And, as distraction tore his brain,
He seized her throat with both his hands.

Speechless the pair; "enjoyed" hung on
The lips that strove to shape his name;
All strength into his hands was gone.
How easy to put out a flame!

Lo, in the starting eyes a speck,
The legend of his luckless youth!
This was the Worm whose writhen neck
Rose between him and his bride Truth!

The act was done; no cause to brood,
Only he wished it done before;
The woman neither bad nor good
Lay, kissed and covered, on the floor.

For now his mind was strangely clear
Of all obsession and all storm;
He knew that his own death was near:
Bravest to die by legal form!

THE BOY

XXI

HE sends his father a few lines
Before the murder case comes on,
Sheet of commiseration (signs
Himself " Your outcast of a son "),

To say he is always firm in mind
He did the thing she most desired;
That the police are very kind,
And he *respected*, not admired;

. And that the sergeant said " That's right,
Immediately give yourself up
To Justice "; that he sleeps at night,
And hopes to drink of Our Lord's cup;

He wishes that her parents, though
Unknown to him, might yet be told
His crime was love; they'd bear the blow
Then, for his heart was never cold;

That if, regardless of disgrace,
His folk would send their photograph,
It would be welcome in that place;
The chaplain has a cheery laugh.

THE BOY

XXII

THE plea of guilt is registered,
The jury shall be spared all pain;
The awful phrase pronounced and heard;
The boy begins to live again.

Death or reprieve? It matters not.
He lives in Christ, and Christ in him;
Immune from man's incarnate lot,
He rides upon the Cherubim.

The pang of mortal fate may clutch,
May seem to clutch; the mind is free.
Nought can his childhood's vision smutch,
It is renewed; what can he see?

Heaven, the Saints (on earth or sped)
Reigning alike, the Mercy-stream
Of Faith, Humility's well-head,
Hearts clustering in their Maker's beam.

Experience, austere, divine,
Mother of Pity, once revealed
As Inexperience, pours her wine
Down throat whose agonies are healed.

Love that broke Life is now made one
With Life unbroken, halves are whole;
The moon co-equal with the sun,
Flesh with the organ of the soul.

